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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000310

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: SIGNATURE CHECK TURNS INTO SAUSAGE FACTORY

Classified By: Mark Wells, Acting Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) The verification process of the signatures in support of recall votes against President Hugo Chavez and various National Assembly deputies proceeds at a snail's pace at the National Electoral Council (CNE). The CNE board initially proposed restricting the access of international observers to parts of the verification process, but relented when the OAS mission threatened to withdraw from the process. The signatures for the presidential recall are still in the physical verification stage. Allegations persist of the CNE's prejudice against the signatures collected against President Chavez. End summary.

CNE Director Zamora Criticizes CNE

12. (C) National Electoral Council (CNE) Vice President Ezequiel Zamora, who is aligned with the opposition, alleged publicly on January 24 that certain CNE workers were engaged in "sabotage" of the signature forms presented by the opposition in support of a recall referendum against President Hugo Chavez, forms that are now in the physical verification stage in the process (prior to transcription). Zamora claimed that the referral rate of questionable signature forms to the Superior Technical Committee were unusually high compared to that of the pro-GOV signature drive against opposition National Assembly deputies. Zamora blamed the head of the informatics section, Leonardo Hernandez, for the disparate treatment. (Note: The Superior Technical Committee, in charge of adjudicating questionable signatures, will review referred forms and determine whether the forms can be forwarded to the transcription process, where individual signatures are checked. The higher rate of referral could result in up to 116,000 signature forms for the committee to review. End note.)

13. (C) OAS observer mission official Edgardo Reis confirmed to poloff on January 27 that the referral rate for the presidential signature forms was 40 percent, a significant rise from the pro-GOV's rate of about four percent. Reis said the informatics section ordered a change in criteria for the physical verification stage once the review of presidential forms began. Reis opined that the move was not illegal, but would translate into a heavy burden for the Superior Technical Committee. Reis commented that CNE workers are performing adequately, but added that absenteeism of the temporary workers in the physical inspection and transcription stages averaged between 15 and 20 percent.

OAS Threatens a Walkout

14. (C) Reis showed poloff an internal CNE memo dated January 14 ordering the CNE's counsel to draft a resolution that limited observation of the verification process to the physical inspection and transcription steps. Only CNE officials would be permitted access to the computer check, quality control, and Superior Technical Committee stages, according to the memo. Learning of the proposal, OAS officials complained that imposing such restrictions would fatally undermine the observer mission. Reis said the OAS mission, acting on instructions from OAS SYG Gaviria, told CNE officials that if observers were not granted necessary access, the mission would withdraw from the process. Reis said the pro-opposition CNE Directors Zamora and Sobella Mejias had threatened to resign over the decision as well.

15. (C) OAS mission leader Fernando Jaramillo requested formally on January 16 that the CNE include international observers in the quality control and committee review stages.

Reis said that Jaramillo and he expressed their concerns to Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, who promised to speak to CNE officials about it. Reis said he thought everything was smoothed out until on January 26, when Pro-Chavez Deputy Nicolas Maduro complained that the OAS was trying to become "the sixth member of the CNE board." (Note: The political proponents of each signature drive are also allowed observers in the process. The proposal to limit observer access includes them as well. End note.)

16. (C) Reis admitted that observer presence in all stages of the process is not necessary in a technical sense so long as they are allowed to cull periodic samples from the rejected signatures. He noted, however, the political value of having OAS observers covering multiple areas within the CNE. Asked whether the CNE would fulfill the February 13 deadline, Reis said that it can, but probably would not at this pace. He expressed concern over keeping the OAS team in place for more than one week beyond the deadline, noting limitations in financing.

CNE Apparently Gives In

17. (U) CNE President Francisco Carrasquero tried to settle the issue on January 27 by announcing that the international observers would be given "widened" access in order to assure total transparency. Carrasquero said the CNE would consult with the OAS and Carter Center to work out the parameters of their participation in stages in question. Carrasquero quelled rumors of discord within the CNE, noting that relations among the five rectors are cordial. He announced that the CNE may let slip the February 13 deadline, adding that the work would be done by the end of February. (Note: Former President Carter told the press January 27 that he understood the CNE would finish no later than March 1. End note.)

Comment

18. (C) Despite the conflict over access, the OAS mission seems to have maintained good relations with the CNE. OAS (and Carter Center) observer presence is crucial to the CNE's success. We were concerned by the CNE's move to limit observation and by reports of prejudiced treatment of the presidential recall signatures, and so DAS DeShazo's message to CNE President Carrasquero on January 22 was timely. The political pressure against the CNE -- internal and external -- is immense and will only increase as the verification process proceeds. However, while the CNE process is neither graceful nor efficient, it is inching forward. The January 25-27 Carter visit contributed considerably to increasing CNE openness to the OAS and Carter Center, and to statements by President Chavez that he would respect whatever the CNE decided. Our message should be of continued support for the CNE as arbiter of the process -- so long as there is international observation and the process is transparent.

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